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State's barrier islands to get boost in plant marsh, dunes

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About 140,000 native barrier island dune and marsh plants will be planted on barrier islands in the next few months, helping to stabilize the quickly-disappearing islands that provide fish and bird habitat and help dampen the effects of hurricanes.

Three contracts have been awarded to two local companies to install nearly 140,000 native dune and marsh plants on three key barrier islands along Louisiana's coast.

The contracts total \$632,000 and were recently awarded by the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries.

The vegetation will reduce erosion on 600 acres, increasing the life span of East Timbalier Island, Grand Terre Island and the Chandeleur Islands.

Black Lake Marsh, Inc. of Lake Charles will install plants

on East Timbalier Island and Grand Terre Island. Bertucci Contracting Corp. of Jefferson will plant the Chandeleur Islands.

The Chandeleur Island planting project will concentrate on marsh platforms around the islands while the East Timbalier Island project will focus on dune vegetation.

The Grand Terre Island project is a mix of both marsh and dune plantings and also includes black mangrove plants.

"Vegetative planting is a low-cost approach from our restoration toolbox that will stabilize the islands and create new habitat for fish and shore birds," said Bill Hogarth, acting director of NOAA Fisheries.

Department of Natural Resources Secretary Jack Caldwell said the barrier islands "are our first line of defense against hurricanes" and other storms.

The plants will be the final phase of rebuilding East Timbalier Island.

The \$81,000 East Timbalier Island project is located in Lafourche Parish and is part of a barrier island chain that fronts Terrebonne and Timbalier Bay. DNR and NOAA rebuilt a large portion of the island in 1999-2000 by dredging 2.6 million cubic yards of sediment to create 220 acres of new marsh and dune habitat.

Last fall, an extensive network of sand-trapping fences was installed through a contract with Coastal

Environments, Inc. of Baton Rouge.

The plantings on Grand Terre Island in Jefferson Parish will re-vegetate over 100 acres with a variety of both marsh and dune plant species to protect the island from erosion. The \$162,000 contract will include installing 600 mangrove plants along sensitive areas of the island's bay shoreline.

The Chandeleur Islands are a 22-mile-long barrier island chain located in easternmost St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes.

In 1998, Hurricane Georges passed within five miles of the islands and created more than 100 washover channels through the barrier chain, dramatically increasing rates of shoreline retreat.

Washovers are where waves swept across the island and pushed sand into the shallow waters behind what was left of the island.

By planting more than 80,000 plants in strategic locations, the \$389,000 project will stabilize the islands, trap sediments and accelerate marsh expansion.

The project was developed after a pilot planting. University of New Orleans geology professor Shea Penland said that the islands suffered similar damage in 1969's Hurricane Camille and nature took 10 years to vegetate the washovers and begin rebuilding the islands, which are important fish habitat.

This planting will speed up the natural process, Penland said several months ago while supporting funding of the project.

The projects are funded under the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act, also known as the Breaux Act.

Enacted in 1990 and renewed for 10 more years last year, the Breaux Act provides funds for protecting, restoring and preserving threatened coastal wetlands, primarily in Louisiana.

It provides about \$40 million in federal funds which are matched by state funds and in-kind services total \$45 million or more for planning, construction and maintenance of restoration projects.

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